LET FREEDOM RING

July 2, 1989

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Luke 9:51-56
Galatians 5:1-14

"For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." --Galatians 5:1 (RSV)

An open Bible in one hand and an open newspaper in the other is the appropriate stance for a contemporary Christian, said Karl Barth.

The Bible is open this morning to St. Paul's letter to the Christian churches in the region of Galatia. The year is 56 A.D. Paul writes:

"For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. Now I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. I testify again to every man who receives circumcision that he is bound to keep the whole law. You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace. For through the Spirit, by faith, we wait for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail, but faith working through love. You were running well; who hindered you from obeying the truth? This persuasion is not from him who called you. A little leaven leavens the whole lump. I have confidence in the Lord that you will take no other view than mine; and he who is troubling you will bear his judgment, whoever he is... For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants of one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"

The newspaper is the Chicago Tribune, May 31, 1989, page 1, dateline Beijing, "Torch of China's Lady Liberty rekindles fervor."

"In Tiananmen Square...a 30-foot-tall Chinese version of the Statue of Liberty revitalized a flagging movement for Democracy Tuesday night.

"Nearly a quarter of a million people defied a government warning...to file past this Chinese lady with the troubled eyes and raised torch...

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"The crowds came in silence, without slogans or banners. They came on foot, both old and young. They arrived in chartered buses, pedicabs, on the flatbeds of tricycles, but most came pedaling down the eight-lane avenues in an endless stream of bicycles...

"For three days and three nights art students at eight Beijing universities labored to sculpt the huge styrofoam and plaster-of-paris figure... they dragged her into the square piece by piece, assembled her overnight.

"It was a feat that electrified the city. For Marxist conservatives it desecrated a square considered until recently the heart and showcase of Chinese Communism.

"Two young men wore T-shirts emblazoned with likenesses of the statue. A girl wore a 'Goddess of Democracy paper hat!

"A group of young factory workers studied the statue across a sea of bobbing heads.

"What does it mean?

"One finally answered: 'I guess it means the people are no longer afraid of the government.

'Doesn't it?'"

As the terrible but magnificent drama of Tiananmen Square was playing out I was in Philadelphia to visit the Bicentennial General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church. The first Presbyterian General Assembly convened in 1789 just a few blocks from the Pennsylvania State House, where delegates from the states were writing a new Constitution; and where 13 years before, 213 years ago this week, delegates from the Crown Colonies stepped up to sign a Declaration written by the delegate from Virginia, Thomas Jefferson...which said:

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights Governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the government..."

We were held in the grip of the terrible drama in Beijing which, by then, was beginning to evolve into tragedy. We read every word of the news accounts and then, one morning, visited again the old part of Philadelphia where the monumentous events occurred more than two centuries ago...the neat row houses, narrow cobble stone streets, shops, churches where freedom was discussed. And the building, the very room where they debated and voted and signed the Declaration and the place where it was first read. Ordinary people lived there, talked about freedom, argued about it, made solemn vows to die for it if need be. We were deeply affected by the reminder that much the same thing was happening at that moment, on the other side of the world.

Why, one wants to ask, all the fuss over freedom...? Why are people still willing to sacrifice for it, die, if need be, for it?

About those people in Philadelphia in 1776, historian Bruce Catton has written:

"They wanted no more of King George, of course, but they also wanted the kind of freedom that came into the front yard and the parlors and the kitchen of the ordinary human being. Men and women did not propose to be bossed around any longer, and at the same time they did not propose to go hungry or live in want or feel the restraints of a tightly ordered society whose classes and customs were beyond change. They saw liberty, not as a glorious abstraction, but as something that began with what the citizen had for breakfast and went on to effect all of the homely concerns of every day life." [American Heritage, 6/74, p.4]

"Not a glorious abstraction...but something which began with what the citizen had for breakfast"... In a book on the meaning of being human, Yale professor, Letty Russell, tells about interviewing people in East Harlem to determine their views on religion. "What do you think salvation means?" she asked. After a few conversion stories, a single woman with several children, unemployed, struggling with the systemic structure of poverty blurted out "It means that I'm more free!" Dr. Russell argues that freedom is at the center of our humanness... "freedom as a quality of human life...the human capacity for choice, and for struggle against internal and external forms of bondage." [Becoming Human, p. 92]

Freedom is one of the ways the Judeo/Christian tradition defines human beings. God, we believe, is interested in freedom, intends freedom, creates freedom. Now a delicate topic - religious chauvinism. Every culture that ever existed has manufactured a theology to undergird its political and military aspirations. Even Marxism, which is officially atheistic, refers to an economic determinism which is simply divine providence without the divine, and then goes on to establish sacred texts, a holy people, hymns and saints... The deities of Babylon, Persia, Egypt, Greece and Rome approved and blessed the comings and goings of their people and their armies. Hitler invoked the cultural and religious traditions of the Germanic people as he sent the Panzers into the Low Countries. Abraham Lincoln, who Elton Trueblood calls the "Theologian of American Anguish," mused about the irony of God's will being claimed so confidently and piously on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line. History should teach us that it is very precarious business to claim the special approval and blessing of God for any culture, any nation, any system of government - including our own. God is not an Aryan or Oriental. God is not a capitalist or a socialist... There was a time when my father's characterization of the Presbyterian Church as the Republican party at prayer, (a characterization he both enjoyed and endorsed) was probably true, but I think it reasonable to propose that in 1989 God is not a Republican or a Democrat.

However, I do propose that God is very much interested in human freedom, and insofar as the subject is alive in our midst, and the concept still central to our experience, I further propose that God does keep an attentive eye on us, as well as on all who struggle with, argue about and

die for it. "Where the spirit of the Lord is...there is freedom" (II Corinthians 3:17)

The subject of freedom is the dominant motif in current religious thought. It is sometimes called Liberation Theology, a term used pejoratively usually by those who have an economic stake in the status quo. The handful of families that still own and run most of El Salvador regard the Liberation Theology of some of the Catholic bishops as a threat...and it is a threat to their economic monopoly and wealth. Archbishop Oscar Romero was gunned down in his cathedral, essentially for proclaiming that God is for economic freedom.

This theology is based on the premise that God is a liberator: that God's relationship with human beings from the very beginning may be understood as a process of enabling them to be free, autonomous, independent of anything that inhibits them from being whole people. God, in the Bible, is the agitator for freedom; "Author of Liberty," the hymn puts it, and the enemy of oppression... God is the one who hears the cries of the people who are in bondage and does something about it. Who is God? God, the Old Testament proclaims is the one who leads us from slavery to freedom, from bondage to liberation.

"For freedom Christ has set us free," St. Paul wrote. The time is the First Century. The situation is the church in Galatia. Paul was addressing new Christians who had been persuaded that the way to be faithful was first to adhere to the old religious law. In Jesus Christ Paul had discovered a whole new way of being religious, a way of freedom, not dependent on rules, regulations, rituals, customs. The whole law is summarized in one sentence, he said, paraphrasing Jesus - "Love your neighbor as yourself." You are faithful, not on the basis of how many rules you keep, but by obediently following Jesus whose single commandment is to love the neighbor. "Don't slip back into the old ways" - Paul warned. The religious law is a kind of unfreedom - slavery, in fact.

That's heady stuff. Freedom is always hard to handle. Threats to freedom are not all external. In the Old Testament freedom saga, Moses leads the children of Israel out of Egypt with the army of Pharaoh in hot pursuit. Ahead of them they see the Red Sea and on the other side the threatening barren wastes of Sinai. And they say to Moses, "What have you done to us? It would have been better to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness." (Exodus 14:11, 12)

The basic human desire for security is often, if not always, in conflict with the possibility of freedom. Egypt didn't seem so bad after all... at least there was enough to eat and a place to sleep.

That's essentially the position those new Galatian Christians were in. The old way included a rule, a regulation, a prescribed way to respond to every conceivable life situation. One knew what to eat, when and how to eat it; when and how much to work, what to wear, the proper prayers to say... Suddenly, here comes Paul saying "You're free from that. You are free to make moral decisions on the basis of God's love in Jesus Christ." And so they became anxious. Furthermore, some representatives of the old way had traveled from Jerusalem to Galatia to correct Paul's liberal

morality; a kind of "truth squad" apparently, "law and order" types who saw in the new freedom Paul proclaimed a distinct threat to the values they held dear. The old way wasn't so bad. At least you know how to live. It provided a minimum of risk and lots of security.

That issue is always before us. There is enormous appeal in a religion which provides answers to all of life's questions and thereby eliminates the need to think for oneself. It would be comfortable to know what is right and wrong in every situation, so comfortable in fact that we are occasionally willing to sacrifice our autonomy in order to feel ethically secure. The security of certainty looks very good to people who are assaulted by tough moral questions. There has never been a time when someone was not trying to limit freedom of expression somewhere - for very sincere reasons. Freedom of expression in Iran does not include the right to insult and desecrate sacred symbols, as Salman Rushdie discovered. In the People's Republic of China freedom of expression does not include desecrating sacred space in Tiananmen Square with a statue. In fact, the dynamic is so universal and powerful that the House of Representatives stayed in Session all night last week so that members of the House could register their hostility toward the first Amendment to the Constitution.

We are, St. Paul knew, willing to lay freedom aside, to restrict it, deny it, hem it in with conditions in the name of morality and security. But there is another threat to freedom. Paul describes it this way: "You were called to freedom...only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants of one another."

Legalism is a threat to freedom. But so is moral laziness, selfishness, or what the New Testament calls sin. Freedom is not the right to do whatever one pleases. In fact it is a gross distortion of freedom when the actions of one are hurtful to another.

In political terms freedom of speech includes your right to express views that are not popular with anyone else...views that the majority of people deplore. That is very rare - and very precious. On the topic of the Supreme Court flag decision about which everyone is so exercised, the New York Times quotes Congressman Ted Weiss, a native of Hungary who as a child fled the Nazis - to the effect that the Supreme Court flag decision is not a threat to anyone but rather the "affirmation of a wondrous freedom." And conservative columnist, George Will, said with characteristic bluntness, "Keep your hands off Mr. Madison's document." Freedom to express views that are unpopular, deplorable to everyone else is very, very precious. But, your freedom does not include the right to yell "Fire" in a crowded theatre.

If freedom is simply the opportunity to indulge your whims and appetites you really aren't free, Paul said, just selfish. As a matter of fact you are in a new kind of slavery - slavery to self.

Freedom demands discipline - self-control, Paul called it. The two are complimentary and interdependent, not contradictory. A musician who is self-disciplined in rehearsal may be free to sit at the keyboard and play a Bach Fugue. The would-be musician, who chooses not to practice, in

the name of freedom, will be confined by his or her own laziness. My guess is that nearly the majority of us know about it personally.

The final enemy of freedom is selfishness - or sin. The founders of the nation understood this Biblical insight perhaps better than anyone in history. When selfishness becomes corporate, when individual egoism is multiplied in the body politic, freedom is gravely threatened.

John Adams once wrote to Thomas Jefferson: "Power always thinks it has a great soul...and that it is doing God's service when it is violating all our laws."

Political scientists note that one of the secrets of the founders of the republic was their realism about the nature of humankind. As a matter of fact, they didn't trust anybody. They had, in theological terms, a healthy sense of human sin and its Pauline corollary, namely that freedom's greatest foe is simple human selfishness.

And so Paul, in the same breath with which he is calling for human freedom says, "through love be servants of one another."

Love apparently is the price of liberty...or justice which is simply love in action. Without justice, freedom is simply a luxury for those in power. Liberty, Paul knew, means freedom to bind oneself in love to one's Lord and one's fellow human beings.

Freedom is best protected when it reaches out in compassion to others... We are, in Christian terms, never more human, never more free than when we give ourselves in humble service to the welfare of someone else.

Charles Peguy's haunting images capture the idea -

"...All the prostrations in the world
Are not worth the beautiful upright
attitude of a free man - or woman kneeling.
All the submissions, all the dejections...
Are not equal in value to the soaring up point,
The beautiful straight soaring up of one single invocation
From a love that is free."

God created human beings to be free. God wants people to be free. The image of God in us is our God-given freedom. "For freedom Christ has set us free," said St. Paul. "Where the spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom."

And so it is no surprise that even in the most repressive, rigidly authoritarian situations men and women remember freedom, and talk about it and argue over it and are willing to die for it...

That tradition is by no means ours alone. In fact, the brave students in Beijing have graced and honored it as eloquently as anyone ever has. But it is our tradition too. And we honor it in memory and song, and in the exercise of love and justice and compassion, all of which have been

given to us by the past, and which we in our day are privileged to hand down to another generation...

So - Let Freedom Ring...
Let music swell the breeze
And ring from all the trees.
Sweet freedom's song...

O God, you are creator of human life and author of human liberty. We thank you this day for our nation, and for those who have established and defended freedom. We thank you for those throughout the world who sing freedom's sweet song, who stand firmly and courageously in the face of tyranny. Bless them. Give them comfort and strength.

And we thank you, O God, for Jesus Christ, in whom we have seen your gift of freedom lived. Give us courage to live in him, and to exhibit in our lives, that glorious freedom you promise to all your children. Amen.